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April 11, 2001

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2001-77

Scholars explore Hispanic influences on theological education

by Bob Kinney

(ENS) How is theological education affected by the changing face of contemporary Christianity as demographics shift significantly throughout the U.S.?

A group of leading Hispanic scholars explored that question during a March 21 conference at the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest. The conference, "Teología en Conjunto: Hispanic Contributions to Theological Education," culminated a year-long collaboration between the Hispanic scholars and seminary faculty members.

In the keynote address, Dr. Justo González compared the multiplicity of the four Gospels with the contributions that Hispanics and other minorities can have on theological education. "We rejoice in the different perspective of each Gospel" as we should with different faces and different voices in education for ministry, said González. "It enriches us all." González is an author, church historian and director of the Hispanic Summer Program, a consortium of 40 institutions that offers masters-level courses in theology to Hispanics.

After a series of small group discussions where Hispanic scholars and seminary faculty shared insights gleaned from their work together since September, each scholar presented observations ranging from Hispanics and demographics to theological education and culture to conclude the conference.

Profound changes

Dr. Jean Pierre Ruíz of St. John's University wondered why the "McDonald's golden arches are

more globally recognized as a symbol than the cross of the Christian tradition." He urged the group to "foster and empower prophetic communities in our congregations and parishes so people who care about each other can build true communities."

As the 2000 census shows, "profound changes have taken place in the United States in past decades," said Dr. Fernando Segovia of Vanderbilt University Divinity School. "One of three people is of non-European descent. The Catholic Church in America is now about one-third Hispanic," he said.

"Hispanic people have an ingrained religion even though they may not practice it," observed Dr. Ismael García of Austin Presbyterian Seminary. "Hispanic religiosity emphasizes spirituality-it's a piety that's grounded in day to day experiences."

Dr. Alejandro García-Rivera of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley termed a new vision of education coming from a Latino consciousness as "New Humanism." While old humanism stated that all experiences illuminate the particular, New Humanism is the opposite-the particular experience illuminates all, according to García-Rivera.

"As an Hispanic Episcopalian, I have reservations about being 'included.' I'm already here," said the Rev. Juan Oliver of the Mercer School in Garden City, New York. "It seems Hispanics are always the guest in someone else's house." When an Anglo priest is among Hispanics, he or she should resist the temptation to always say 'Let me tell you how to do this.' Instead, say 'I do not know. Show me,'" said Oliver.

Avoiding violence

The Rev. Pablo Jiménez, former seminary faculty member, reminded the group that "Hispanics are very diverse and gaps are widening among them. We need to build bridges with other ethnic groups if we are to avoid a civil war in the U.S. We people of faith need to get together. The bridges we build may help this country avoid racial and ethnic violence."

Referring to the Seminary of the Southwest pairing its faculty with Hispanic scholars, Segovia said, "I commend the seminary for undertaking what very

few if any institutions have done. It's a bold and daring move."

With funding from the Wabash Center in Indiana, faculty and scholars have worked to increase cross-cultural awareness throughout the seminary curriculum. At the heart of their work has been a central question: "What needs to occur in course preparation and in the classroom for students to increase their sensitivity towards people of different backgrounds, both during their period of theological education and afterwards in their ministry setting?" What is then learned in the seminary's setting in the Hispanic Southwest can also be applied to other cultures throughout the country.

--Bob Kinney is publications director for the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas.

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